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ABSTRACT

In an effort to introduce communication skills to elementary students, a basic communication lesson was taught to 8 different groups of students (3rd, 5th, and 6th graders) with approximately 15 students in each group. The groups met for 25-minute sessions. One mixed-age group met for 60 minutes. Four objectives were formulated for each class, namely, to enable students to: (1) explain the meaning of the term communication; (2) understand some of the reasons why people communicate; (3) recognize the five basic elements of the communication process; and (4) identify some factors which affect the communication process. Results indicated that all objectives were met. The last objective, however, was the least realized goal; students did understand what was meant by a communication variable but would not have been able to list all communication variables. Results suggest that communication instruction can be successful at the elementary level and that students have an interest in the subject matter. (MG)

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TEACHING COMMUNICATION SKILLS EFFECTIVELY: Can it Be Accomplished in the Elementary Schools?

INTRODUCTION

In the last few years there has been an effort made on the part of organizations like the Speech Communication Association (SCA) to encourage school systems to include Communication training in the curriculum.1 Works by Cooper and Higginbotham have presented a need for such study and have argued that Communication is indeed basic and not something that will be internalized willy-nilly by students in the course of studying other subjects.2 The position of the SCA seems so clearly correct that it is difficult for one who is involved with the teaching and studying of Communication to understand how it is possible that such an argument has to be made. An informal study of Western New York public school administrators yielded results indicating that such an argument indeed has to be made. The results of the study indicated that the notion of Communication as a bonafide subject to be taught had been given little more than peripheral and cursory consideration.3 Cassandra Book's article on the status of Communication education in the public schools corroborates these findings.4

In brief, the argument that Communication scholars make is this one. Communication is a very basic skill in that people need to demonstrate efficiency in communication for a variety of occupational, social, and political reasons. Communication skills can be taught, but they must be taught

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systematically and continuously in the same way that English, History, Mathematics, and Science are taught. One can not reasonably expect a single course in say, Public Speaking, during the senior year in high school to constitute the necessary training in such an important skills area. The "gift of gab" is like the "gift of Math" if one has it one must hone it, if one doesn't have it one must develop whatever strength one has in the area to become as skilled as possible.

Presently, the first training many students get in Communication occurs in their first year of college.5 I have argued that these introductory courses could and should be taught first on the elementary school level. To assess the accuracy of this claim, I attempted to teach a very basic Communication lesson to elementary school students. This article reports the results of this first hand examination.

METHODOLOGY

During a two day period, I met with eight different groups of elementary school youngsters. The class sessions were each twenty five minutes long with the exception of one session which lasted sixty minutes. There were approximately fifteen students in each class. Of the eight classes three were six grade groups, two were fifth grade classes, two were third graders and there was one mixed group. The mixed group met for sixty minutes.

I formulated four discrete learning objectives for each class. Specifically, they were:

At the conclusion of the class, each student would be able to:

1) explain the meaning of the term communication.

2) understand some of the reasons why people communicate.

3) recognize the five basic elements of the communication process.

4) identify some factors which affect the communication process.

These may be challenging goals for twenty five minute sessions. Yet the goals are attainable in optimal conditions. In addition, the four objectives represent fundamental tenets in Communication study, and it was important to examine if any of the four were beyond the conceptual grasp of the elementary school youngsters.

RESULTS

The experience of teaching the elementary school students was a humbling one. The content, as will be explained more fully later on in this article, was well received. Also, nothing in the experience indicated that this material shouldn't to be taught on the elementary school level.

What was difficult about the experience was adapting appropriate pedagogical styles, and ironically, communication styles, to a wholly different audience. In the

paragraphs that follow there is a discussion of those factors that negatively affected the instruction. They reflect, as will soon be evident, problems endemic to the teaching of elementary school students.

Fatigue

After ten minutes of my first session I thought I had sparred fifteen rounds with Joe Frazier. I was exhausted. I had not adequately anticipated or respected the energy requirements of elementary school teaching. I was better prepared for the second sessions and progressively learned how to expend and conserve energy. However, my initial obstacle was one of simple fatigue.

Attention Span

There is nothing inherent about Communication subject matter which requires a longer student attention span than other more traditional subjects. However, I was not prepared for the very short attention span that elementary school students have and manifest. I felt intensely "on" during each of the twenty five minute periods. There seemed to be a great pressure to keep and meet the attention of the students.

Participation Patterns

When I began teaching the first session and asked my

initial question I was delighted with the enthusiastic response. Nearly all of the fifteen students were falling from their chairs with hands extended pleading for a chance to respond to my query. Unfortunately, such gestures did not correlate with the students having anything meaningful to say. After calling on one student I repeated my question,

"What do you think the word communication means?"

The eight year old shrugged, smiled, and then this same youngster who seconds ago had pleaded for a chance to speak, responded with,

"I don't know."

I again asked my question and again twelve students begged for a chance. The second respondent answered my question directly, but with content I would not have predicted. This young boy responded with a twenty five second explanation of how his cat purrs. The explanation came complete with an imitation. The responses nonplused me. Occasionally, I'd find myself pausing to regain my equanimity.

Vocabulary Differences

While I had consciously realized that vocabulary had to be appropriate for my audience, it was difficult to assess how much adaptation was necessary. In addition, the youngsters' slang was often indecipherable and/or perplexing. Sometimes it took a while for idiomatic

expressions to register. One singular usage which I found surprising in its frequency was the usage of the word "bribery" for persuasion. In each class when I would ask the students what they thought persuasion meant, one of the youngsters would invariably blurt, "bribery."

Interruptions

At one point during a session, a little girl came running up to me while I was speaking. The girl was holding a tissue in her hand. I stopped speaking, having been startled by her approach. In a squeaky voice she said,

"I found this on the floor."

"Oh", is all I could offer in response. It was a puzzled "Oh" and not an "Oh" of understanding. I took the tissue by a corner that did not appear to be moist and then automatically thanked the student for her contribution before I realized what I was saying. She responded with a genuine, "Your welcome," sat down, and she, as well as everyone else in the class, awaited the next point from me as if this type of interruption was a common occurrence.

Discipline

At another juncture a rather beefy looking third grader walloped the boy sitting next to him for what appeared to be the grand transgression of inadvertently kicking him with an idly swinging leg. As soon as the blow had connected the pugilist shouted,

"He kicked me first." To which the victim predictably countered,

"Did not."

"Did too!" asserted the bully.

"Didn't mean to" the now crying victim responded.

I was so stunned that it took me a while to react. Finally, I separated the two.

Age Differences

The transition of going from a sixth grade class to a third grade class is considerable. This is not news to elementary school teachers, but may be for those who teach on different levels. Whereas three years on the college level is relatively insignificant, a twelve year old and a nine year old are in vastly different worlds. Strategies that are likely to attract the attention of third graders were inappropriate for the sixth graders. This problem was particularly apparent when the children were mixed in the one class which had students from kindergarten through the sixth grade.

Inappropriate Teaching Style

In general, the instruction was hampered because of the utilization of a teaching style which was not the best approach for teaching elementary school students.

Despite the teaching related problems, the experience did indeed confirm the basic assumption that had initially been made. Students were receptive to the topic of Communication. They were able to grasp fundamental concepts which are typically first presented to college freshmen. In addition, in all but the first class, the students indicated an eagerness to learn more about this area, expressing a recognition that this "stuff" was important and could help them.

In terms of the specific objectives formulated for the instruction, the following conclusions can be drawn.

(1)Each student will be able to explain the meaning of the term communication.

By the second class this goal was met. The first session was severely hampered because of the problems discussed previously. However, after the initial exposure, it became clear that students understood what was meant by the term communication, and could, for the most part, understand the not simplistic concept of "receiver orientation."[6]

(2) Each student will understand some of the reasons why people communicate.

Students were able, with little prodding to cite that people communicate to persuade ("bribe") and, inform. With more solicitation students commented that sometimes people

communicate to entertain, and with considerably more teacher imput most students recognized that people communicate sometimes simply because communication feels good. That is, people sometimes communicate to cathart. (The term "cathart" was not used in the instruction).

(3) Each student will recognize the five basic elements involved in the communication process.

Most students recognized quite quickly that each communication act has a sender, receiver, and message. The concepts of channel and feedback were not thoroughly understood or internalized. These concepts simply needed more time.

(4)Each student will be able to identify some factors which affect the communication process.

This was the least realized goal. Partly this was because on three occasions I barely got to this area. Students, however, did recognize, and in some classes offer that "not understanding words" (vocabulary); "not paying attention"; "being uninterested"; and "not liking the person one is speaking to", could affect the success of the communication. The students would not have been able to list all communication variables, yet, for the most part, they did understand what was meant by a communication variable.

SUMMARY

Communication study is important for students in the early grades. Very little is more elementary than speaking and listening. Very little is more important for students' social, occupational, and educational successes than an ability to communicate effectively. This experience of teaching elementary level students indicates that Communication instruction can be successful, and that students have an interest in this subject matter.

It seems clear that qualified elementary school teachers with a knowledge of basic Communication principles could and should teach these principles to youngsters in a systematic, continuous way, just as Arithmetic, Writing, and Reading are taught.

To avoid teaching Communication in a systematic and continuous way would be to assume that speaking and listening skills are unimportant or that students will somehow become skilled in speaking and listening simply because they have ears and can produce sounds. It would seem that educators are too wise to avoid dealing with this instructional challenge.

ENDNOTES

1. The SCA has published a pamphlet entitled, "Speech Communication Association Guidelines[:] Speaking and Listening Competencies for High School Graduates." These guidelines are available through the SCA national office in Annandale, Virginia.

2. Pages 1-12 in Cooper's book, Activities for Teaching Speaking and Listening: Grades 7-12, present a strong argument for Communication training. Although the emphasis in the book as a whole is for 7-12th grade instruction, the argument on pages 1-12 is applicable for all levels including primary education.

Dorothy Higginbotham's article, "On the Total Elementary School Speech Program" appears in, On Teaching Speech in Elementary and Junior High Schools edited by J. Jeffrey Auer and Edward B. Jenkins. The first thirteen pages of Higginbotham's article, which appear on pages 3-16 in the book, argue for Communication training on the elementary school level.

3. The study consisted of a survey which was mailed to principals of elementary, middle, and senior high schools in Western, New York. The survey contained a series of open ended questions regarding the nature and extent of Communication courses offered at the schools. The responses indicated that the most extensive curricula in Communication were found in districts which offered optional Public Speaking courses as well as extra curricular debating opportunities. Most respondents indicated that Communication training, when it occurred, was integrated into other subject areas-for example, oral reports of group projects in Social Studies classes.

4. See Book, Cassandra and Edward J. Pappas., "The Status of Speech Communication in the Secondary Schools in the United States: An Update." Communication Education Volume 30, pages 199-209.

5. Of over one hundred students taking an introductory Communication course at Northeastern University during the 1987 Winter quarter only one student had taken any mandatory courses in Communication prior to coming to the University. Ten others had enrolled in Communication courses which were offered as electives at their high schools. Over 50 per cent of these elective courses were offered for a semester only, and not for the entire year. This information is consistent with that which is reported by Book and Pappas.

6. Receiver orientation refers to the assumption that a message has been communicated only when some receiver has actually received a message, either correctly or incorrectly. Messages, then, are not labeled Communication when they are sent by sources, but when they are received by receivers. The study of Communication includes all messages received by receivers even if (a) sources did not intend to relay any information whatsoever or (b) the receivers received the message differently from the way the source wanted the message to be received. Since (a) and (b) are rather frequent occurrences in daily intercourse, the receiver oriented definition of Communication is a constructive definition for Communication study.

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